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SUBJECT: TURKEY: 2007 - INTOLERANCE AND VIOLENCE TOWARD
RELIGIOUS MINORITIES SPIKES

Classified By: A/Political Counselor Kelly Degnan, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

11. (U) This is a joint Embassy Ankara-Consulate General
Istanbul cable.

12. (C) Summary: Intolerance and violence against Turkey's
dwindling religious minority communities spiked in 2007. The
January assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant
Dink, the brutal killing of three Christians in Malatya, and
the stabbing of a Catholic Priest in Izmir were the starkest
examples of intolerance toward non-Muslims. The government
failed to deliver any of its long-promised reforms for
religious minorities, and ruling and opposition parties alike
played the nationalist card to attract votes during 2007's
parliamentary and presidential elections. While GOT
officials decried the Dink murder, they declined to use the
groundswell of public sorrow and shame to confront pervasive
societal intolerance and prejudice. Turkey is expected to
take some important symbolic steps toward improving religious
freedom in 2008, including re-passing the Foundations Law,
amending Article 301 (insulting "Turkishness") and
constitutional reforms. But changing the underlying public
mindset that narrowly defines a Turk to exclude diverse
religious or ethnic backgrounds is a prerequisite to ending
the type of intolerance witnessed in 2007. End summary.

2007: A Low Point for Turkey's Religious Minorities

13. (SBU) Claims that Turkey is a model of religious tolerance
took a beating in 2007. While many Turks -- from the
government's top leaders to the man on the street -- firmly
believe religious discrimination does not exist, Turkey's
dwindling religious minorities (approximately 65,000 Armenian
Orthodox; 25,000 Jews; 15,000 Syrian Orthodox; 4,000 Greek
Orthodox; and 3,000 Protestants) faced unprovoked violent
attacks and a government that stalled on long-promised
reforms to improve their situation.

January: Shocking Murder of Hrant Dink

14. (SBU) Turks were shocked to learn on January 19 that a
17-year-old ultranationalist, Ogun Samast, had assassinated
Turkish-Armenian journalist and activist Hrant Dink in front
his Armenian language newspaper's office. Samast shot Dink

three times in the neck and head, killing him immediately. Samast confessed the next day, but a national debate ensued over who was really to blame. Many argued Turkey's Supreme Court of Appeals had essentially handed Dink a death sentence in July 2006 by upholding a six-month suspended sentence against Dink for violating Penal Code Article 301 ("humiliating Turkishness"); Dink had called the 1915-17 massacre of Armenians a genocide in a series of articles in 2004. Ironically, the articles' focus was convincing the Armenian Diaspora to put aside their grievances against Turks. Some blamed security officials for failing to protect Dink despite repeated threats to his life. Photographs of policemen proudly posing with Samast in front of Turkish flags shortly after Samast's arrest did little to dispel such accusations.

15. (SBU) Dink's funeral drew tens of thousands of people in a show of Turkish solidarity against his assassination. Mourners brandished signs exclaiming "We are all Hrant" and "301 Kills", but it was the "We are all Armenian" signs that drew nationalist ire. Though PM Erdogan spoke out against the assassination and visited the Dink family to express his condolences, many Turks and international observers were disappointed that no high-level government official took part in the funeral ceremonies. The ongoing murder investigation has been laced with controversy, with Dink family attorneys alleging a cover-up that extends well beyond the 18 suspects indicted thus far. The trial, which began July 2 behind closed doors because Samast was a minor and reportedly included his confession during an October 1 session, is expected to reconvene on February 11.

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April: Massacre of Three Christians in Malatya
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16. (SBU) A group of youths brutally killed three Christians on April 18 in a small Christian publishing house in the eastern Anatolian city of Malatya. The three victims -- two Turks and a German citizen -- were found with their throats slit and their hands and legs bound. One was still alive when found, but died later in the hospital. Four suspects were caught as they were trying to escape, while another jumped out a window and was hospitalized.

17. (C) High-level GOT officials, including the prime minister, minister of interior, and head of the religious affairs directorate (Diyanet), condemned the murders as "savagery," and assured "all necessary measures would be taken to prevent new killings." Their statements were undermined by the entrenched bureaucracy's reaction, which emphasized the danger of growing missionary activities in Turkey. A day after the murders, Niyazi Guney, a senior official in the ministry of justice, reflected this sentiment when he remarked to parliamentarians that, "Missionary work is even more dangerous than terrorism and unfortunately is not considered a crime in Turkey."

18. (SBU) The suspects' trial began November 23 in Malatya amid massive security. Five defendants face multiple life sentences for murder and terrorist acts; two others are charged with assisting in the planning. Attorneys representing the victims' families have criticized the public prosecutors for collecting details of the victims' missionary activities but failing to probe for information on those who may have recruited and encouraged the youths to commit the murders. The attorneys claim the prosecutorial files contain revelations that have disturbing parallels with the Dink murder: In the six months preceding the murders, four of the suspects acquired new cell phones 106 times, suggesting the unemployed youths had financial support to help them avoid surveillance. The youths' phone records show they had regular contacts with a local council member from the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), someone in the

Ankara headquarters of the Special Police Unit, a public prosecutor, and a military official. The trial will resume on January 14.

December: Catholic Priest Stabbed in Izmir

¶9. (SBU) Police detained a 19-year old Turkish man shortly after he stabbed Italian Priest Adriano Franchini inside Izmir's St. Antoine Church on December 16. Franchini survived the attack and said he would not press charges against the attacker, who he described as a mentally disturbed youth. FM Babacan told the press he "learned of the attack with deep sorrow," and recalled that "in Turkey different religions, sects and cultures have lived together for centuries." Many Turkish Christians believe it was not an isolated incident but part of a troubling trend of intolerance toward Christians. They note the attacker said he had been influenced by "Valley of the Wolves," a popular ultranationalistic TV series that spews rhetoric against Christian missionaries (septel).

GOT Fails to Deliver Long-Promised Reforms

¶10. (SBU) A risk-averse government struggling with contentious parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007 failed to enact reforms that would have benefited minorities. Despite international pressure to repeal or significantly modify Article 301 -- and statements by the prime minister and foreign minister that the provision would be amended -- the controversial law remains on the books and was used to convict Dink's son Arat on October 11. Following the elections, the government focused on fighting PKK terrorism and drafting a new constitution and failed to push through the draft Foundations Law, which would make it easier for minority foundations to own and manage properties. Parliament had previously passed the law but then-President Sezer vetoed it in 2006. The Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki Seminary remains closed despite repeated requests to re-open

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it as a vocational school, and Ministry of Environment and Forestry officials damaged a centuries-old Greek Orthodox church under restoration on the same island in November. Alevis continued unsuccessfully to seek proportional disbursement of government funding for their places of worship (cem evi) and for inclusion of Alevi principles in public school religion courses.

Small Steps of Progress Fall Short

¶11. (SBU) Turkey took several positive steps during the year on the religious freedom front:

--GOT officials re-opened a government-restored Armenian Church on Akdamar Island in Lake Van on March 29, but refused an Armenian Patriarchate request to display a cross and allow the church to host select religious ceremonies. The former church will be a museum managed by the ministry of culture.

--The ministry of interior issued a June 19 circular to all governors that acknowledged an increase in individual criminal actions and attacks against non-Muslim citizens and their places of worship, and requested governors take protective measures to protect at-risk individuals, groups, or property. Yet several Turkish Christians who faced death threats during the year told us they struggled unsuccessfully to obtain state protection.

--The Jehovah's Witnesses won a multi-year struggle to obtain legal recognition for their church on July 31. Church officials told us the victory has been mostly symbolic, as they continue to face local bureaucratic obstruction to requests to worship at particular sites.

Comment: Intolerance Calls For Giant Leaps of Reform

¶12. (C) Many Turkish commentators and several contacts blame the GOT for tacitly helping sow seeds of intolerance and xenophobia that contributed to attacks against religious minorities in 2007. In the lead-up to July parliamentary elections, both ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP) unabashedly played the nationalist card in an effort to pry votes from the far-right MHP. Then-Justice Minister Cemil Cicek's comments in fall 2006 that those charged under Article 301 with "insulting Turkishness" were "stabbing the nation in the back" illustrated the government's failure to tamp down spiraling nationalist sentiment. Following the Dink murder, the GOT failed to capitalize on the unique, if tragic, opportunity to initiate reform and promote tolerance.

PM Erdogan, then-President Sezer, then-FM Gul, and CHP Chairman Baykal did not attend Dink's high profile funeral. Similarly, though senior-level leaders were careful to condemn the Malatya murders, none traveled to Malatya to attend the funerals for the murdered Christians or make a public statement. The widow of one of the victims told us that no Turkish official had contacted her to offer condolences.

¶13. (C) Countering extremist nationalists and taking bold political action to confront pervasive societal intolerance and prejudice remains politically risky in a country where nationalism remains a fundamental aspect of Turkish identity.

The AKP is working on constitutional reforms that would expand freedoms for minorities, and is expected to take some important symbolic steps toward improving religious freedom in 2008, including re-passing the Foundations Law and amending Article 301. But changing the underlying public mindset that narrowly defines a Turk to exclude diverse religious or ethnic backgrounds is a prerequisite to ending the type of intolerance witnessed in 2007. Dink himself noted prior to his death that until the GOT treated Turks of non-Turkish descent (Armenians, Kurds, Greeks, etc.) as "normal citizens" - allowing them to serve in the police and the bureaucracy and use their own languages in education -- Turkish society would remain divided.

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